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50 MOST INCREDIBLY

USEFUL SITES



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50 MOST INCREDIBLY USEFUL SITES

This is it: our annual list of sites that fulfill the Web's true promise. They may not make you rich overnight, but they will make your day that much more livable. They may be large or small, well-known or brand-new, but every one of these sites and services will actually get something done for you. They do chores, perform tasks, and smooth out the rough spots of your daily grind, from the time your online butler wakes you up (1-800-555-Tell) to the time you head for a nightcap at the coolest new bar in town (Citysearch). We've also included the 10 essential bookmarks every savvy surfer needs, five sites to help you conquer your gadgets, six useful hidden treasures at the Net's biggest portals, and eight great tricks to try using just your ZIP code. It's the bookmark list you just can't surf without.

BY JEREMY CAPLAN AND DON WILLMOTT

TECHNOLOGY

150 MOST USEFUL SITES

before you start racking up those per-minute fees talking to a lawyer (or you may find out you don't need one at all). The FindLaw portal covers everything from mortgages and divorce to immigration and taxation. Search by topic or select key headings from the main directory page. If you can't find the answer here, try **Nolo** (nolo.com), another good do-it-yourself legal site.

START YOUR RESEARCH

journalistexpress.com
Don't let the name fool you. JournalistExpress is a great place to begin gathering information—regardless of your profession. Its excellent links are neatly organized by topic (news, stats, people searches, and many more), and you can add and delete links to make it a truly personalized portal.

LOOK UP ANY WORD

yourdictionary.com
The YourDictionary site lets you search dictionaries in more than 260 languages and upwards of 100 specialties (business, law, medicine, computing, and more). Advised by leading linguistic experts, this site is invaluable both for word lovers and for those who failed junior-high spelling tests.

SEARCHING FOR PUBLIC**RECORDS**

pac-info.com

More than 6,900 public databases are available at Search Systems, which means you can find information about court decisions, sex offenders in your neighborhood, unclaimed property lists, and just about anything else contained in a public record. Search nationally or by state or city. We trust you'll use this awesome power responsibly.

YOUR INCREDIBLY USEFUL ZIP CODE

THOSE FIVE LITTLE DIGITS CAN DO A LOT FOR YOU ONLINE. JUST TYPE THEM IN TO GET...

SAVINGS ON UTILITY BILLS

LowerMyBills.com points you toward the best local deals on gas, electricity, cell phone plans, and more.

MOVIE LISTINGS

Don't feel like driving too far tonight? **Moviefone** (moviefone.com) knows what's playing nearby and includes reviews, too.

OPPORTUNITIES TO VOLUNTEER

VolunteerMatch (volunteermatch.com) offers a menu of ways to offer assistance to those who need it close to home.

A DOCTOR

DocFinderPlus (docfinderplus.com) not only finds

doctors but also helps you narrow your search by specialty and health plan participation.

A 10-DAY WEATHER FORECAST

Weather.com tells you whether it'll rain or shine for the next 240 hours.

A HOME ENERGY AUDIT

Home Energy Saver (homeenergysaver.lbl.gov) estimates your annual expenses and suggests ways to save big bucks.

A LIST OF POLITICAL FAT CATS

OpenSecrets.org posts lists of who's been donating to whom in your town and how much money is changing hands. Fascinating stuff.

A MOSQUITO AND TICK REPORT

SteeleBites.com tells you how bad it will be for the next few weeks in your area or in any vacation spot you choose. The site also provides a helpful list of mosquito and tick defense tips.

ACCESS YOUR COMPUTER FROM ANYWHERE

gotomypc.com

Whether you're at a beach house in Miami or on a business trip in Bombay, log in at GoToMyPC and you can read your e-mail, open files, run programs, and operate your computer as if you were at home sitting in front of it. Fees start at \$15 a month, but it's worth the expense if you need to check in while you're away.

SURF THE WEB ANONYMOUSLY

anonymizer.com

Tired of worrying about privacy online? Go to the Anonymizer home page, type in the URL of any site, and visit it without leaving tracks for marketers, hackers, or stalkers. The service also keeps your computer free of bugs and cookies and reduces the chance that you'll download a virus. For a fee, the site provides even more security.

GET A WAKE-UP CALL

1-800-555-tell.com

Think of it as your personal butler. After registering for free on this site, pick up the phone, call 1-800-555-Tell, and say "wake-up call," the time you'd like to be awakened, and the phone number where you'll be. At the specified time, the service will call to rouse you. An alternative service is available for \$5 a month from iPing iPing.com, where you can use the Net to set up phone (or wireless) reminders for appointments, meetings, birthdays, and even TV shows, meaning you'll never have an excuse for forgetting anything again.

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myimager.com

Want a quick and easy way to crop, retouch, and refine your

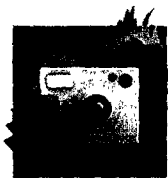
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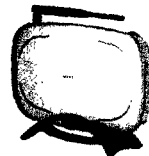
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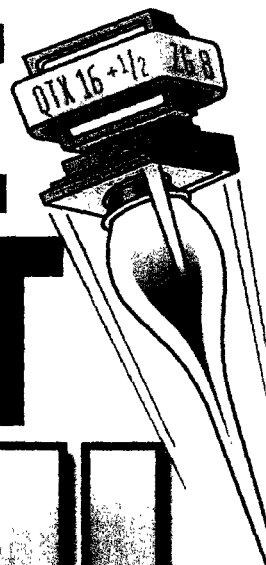


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Much of the Web's best data is buried deep in a site or hidden on

pages cluttered with links or distracting, flashing ads. The true value of the Net comes when you can get the information you want fast—preferably in less than a minute.

We dug deep into Web sites to uncover 50 destinations that help you get things done and that can provide important information quickly (including some PDA applications and cell phone services).

So you want info fast? Read on. ►

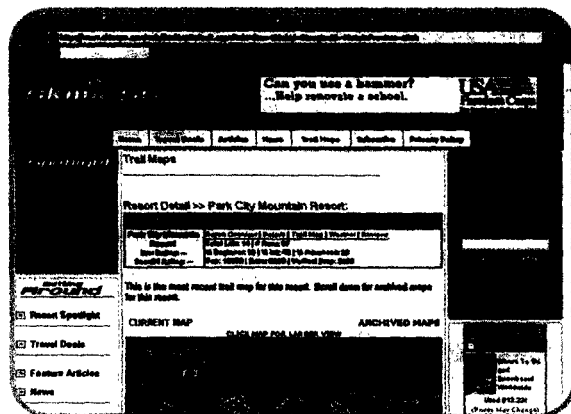
BY KIM ZETTER • ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER AND MARIA HOEY

COVER STORY

Audiogalaxy's Satellite is one of the best file-sharing programs for getting legal music—it accesses more than 800,000 music files and offers several download settings. Note: The free version of this program contains the Gator adware plugin. www.audiogalaxy.com/satellite/

Find Out What's on TV

There is never a TV program guide around when you need one. Well now you can get program listings easily through your PC. Just type in a zip code and your method of TV service (cable, satellite dish, or broadcast antenna), and you'll get listings of programs showing in your area. And when you come back, the site remembers your choices. www.tvguide.com/listings/setup/localize.asp



SKIMAPS.COM HAS trail maps and snow conditions for ski resorts from Stowe and Mt. Snow to Whistler Blackcomb.

Locate Ski Runs

Hankering to ski this year but don't know where to find the best runs? SkiMaps.com offers trail maps for resorts around the world, plus information about lift-ticket prices and accommodations. It includes maps for snow regions in countries such as the United States, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, and even Australia. How about a Down Under winter wonderland in July? find.pcworld.com/32447

Reserve a Campsite

Arrange a cross-country camping trip by using this site to reserve tent grounds or a cabin in any of more than 100,000 camp-

sites across the U.S. You can also apply for canoeing permits, as well as hunting and fishing licenses, and the site includes a handy camping checklist and trail maps to help you plan activities once you arrive. www.reserveamerica.com

READY REFERENCE



Read E-Book Classics

Nothing promotes the Net's "information wants to be free" philosophy quite like Project Gutenberg. The site offers free downloads of more than 6000 electronic books in ASCII format, an eclectic selection ranging from fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm to the writings of Winston Churchill and William Shakespeare. A

worldwide network of mirror sites ensures you'll get your downloads quickly. find.pcworld.com/32480

Make an International Phone Call

Type in the country you're calling from and the country you wish to reach at the Embassy-World search engine site, and it will tell you what you need to dial to place that call. The site

also links to 700 residential and business phone directories, with the relevant directories listed on the results page. find.pcworld.com/32483

Calculate Postage

Don't go postal over long lines at the post office. Avoid the crowds and the window that closes just as you reach the head of the queue by calculating postal rates (including overseas mailings), looking up zip codes, or purchasing stamps—online. Stamps arrive in three to five business days with a \$1 fee for shipping and handling. You can also preorder commemorative stamps before they're available at post offices. www.usps.com/ncsc

Research Public Records

Every state has different rules about what records the public can access. This site offers links to thousands of records, categorized by geographical region and subject. You can find links to records about foreclosures, professional state licenses, property reports, missing-person databases, and college alumni lists, among others. www.searchsystems.net

Sort Out Valid Health Concerns

Some pretty far-fetched stuff can make its way into your in-box, so check the facts before you join the rumor mill. The CDC's list of hoaxes can help you determine what you should take note of and what you should ignore. Poisonous perfume samples sent through the mail? That's just a hoax. Ditto those reports about tainted Coca-Cola and Pepsi. www.cdc.gov/hoax_rumors.htm

Take the Guesswork Out of Foreign Postal Addresses

Postal conventions vary widely from country to country. Wondering if you should place the street number before the apartment number, or vice versa when you're mailing a package to Italy? This site's guide to international postal addresses sorts out confusing postal rules, codes, and abbreviations. www.columbia.edu/kermit/postal.html

Kim Zetter is a contributing editor for PC World.

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7/15/2003
THE BEST WAY TO...

...Dig Up Information on Someone

By JENNIFER SARANOW

WHEN I ARRIVED at Skipper Porteous's office in mid-July, the first thing he said was, "You look like your picture." He also knew my birthday, my Social Security number, where I went to high school, when I graduated, my job, my work e-mail, my home address and my neighbors' names.

Mr. Porteous, a private investigator in New York who runs Sherlock Investigations, found all of this in less than an hour online. For Mr. Porteous and many other investigators, the Internet has become an indispensable tool for digging up information about someone. He estimates that as much as 75% of his job involves searching on the Internet, compared with less than 50% five years ago and none a decade ago.

And it's not just for professionals. Individuals also are using the Web to do background checks on friends and acquaintances. In fact, the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a Washington nonprofit organization that studies the impact of the Internet, found in a July 2002 report that about a third of Internet users have plugged a person's name into a search engine.

While most casual Internet users can satisfy their curiosity using Google or other search engines, expert online researchers have at their fingertips a whole host of public and private data-

Ms. SARANOW IS A REPORTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE IN NEW YORK. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT JENNIFER.SARANOW@WSJ.COM.

Journal Link: WSJ.com subscribers can see an expanded chart of online portraits in the Online Journal at WSJ.com/Reports.

bases, where they can find a frightening amount of detail about someone's background, financial condition and personal life. Some of the data, like Social Security numbers, is hard to find without access to special private-investigator and law-enforcement sites. And a lot of the information is available only for those willing to pay. Still, there's a wealth of information available free online. You just need to spend the time and know where to look.

"We can usually get somebody's life story from the Internet," says Jim Parker, a Wesley Chapel, Fla., private investigator who specializes in Internet investigations. "It's a matter of getting lucky and developing leads and going from one lead to another."

Such accessibility has many people distressed. There have been legislative and legal attempts—including new laws in Maryland and proposed laws in Florida—to restrict the availability of some information, such as court records and identifying information like Social Security numbers, according to Charles Davis, executive director of the Freedom of Information Center at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

"There are a number of state and federal efforts as well to try and put the cows back in the barn," he says.

Start With a Search Engine

Even with all the resources at their disposal, expert researchers start at the same place as amateurs: online search engines such as Google, Ask, Jeeves, or AlltheWeb, which they use to locate pictures, mentions of a person's name, occupations, and details like states and addresses where someone has lived.

There are tricks for helping to narrow a search on a search engine. For instance, if someone has a common name, search

the first and last names in quotation marks, with other identifying features such as city and occupation also within quotes. (A search for Jane Smith, without quotes, will bring up pages containing both people named Jane and people named Smith.) Experts also recommend using multiple search engines, since each site may bring up different results.

Beyond search engines, public records found online—including property listings, personal vital statistics and court cases—are among the best resources. But getting at them, in most cases, requires finding the Web site of the particular state or county where the records reside. And that could be a time-consuming process.

To save time on such searches, many investigative companies have created portals with links to public-records databases. And some are free. One of the best is SearchSystems.net, created in 1997 by Pacific Information Resources Inc., a Thousand Oaks, Calif., company that does background research on companies. The site links to more than 15,000 searchable public-records databases, of which about 2,000 charge for access to records.

Visitors can search records available nationally or by state, or can use the site's "public record locator" feature to find a particular type of database, such as birth certificates, in a specific location. Most people who use the site work for financial institutions, private-investigation firms and law-enforcement agencies, says Tim Koster, president of Pacific Information Resources, but individuals have access as well.

Accuracy is key to getting the information you need. Mr. Porteous, the private investigator, and I couldn't find property information on Search Systems for the county in Illinois where I grew up, nor for New York City. Mr. Koster says we proba-

Portals for Prying

Sure, typing someone's name into a search engine is easy. But really digging up information about a person on the Internet can be a tedious task involving, for example, checking the Web sites for every state and county where a subject has ever lived. Thankfully, some companies and amateur sleuths have created portals that link to many online databases, to help save some clicks and some cash—they are all free. Here are a few to check out.

Search Systems

SearchSystems.net

A creation of Pacific Information Resources Inc., a Thousand Oaks, Calif., company that does background research on companies, this site links to more than 15,000 searchable public-records databases. Visitors can search by type of database, like "census" or "most wanted," or search databases by state, nationally or internationally.

BRB Publications Inc.

BRBpub.com/pubrecsies.asp

The publishing company, based in Tempe, Ariz., runs a site with links to nearly 1,700 county, state and federal Web addresses where users can access public records.

Will Yancey's home page

WillYancey.com

Will Yancey, a Dallas accountant who specializes in litigation support, started compiling bookmarks of his favorite sites in 1995. Today, his site offers users links to other portals as well as to legal and political directories.

University of Virginia's Portico

IND00gs.virginia.edu/portico/home.html

The links the university has collected to help higher-education fund-raising researchers and other nonprofit organizations include databases of property records, births, marriages and divorces.

Getting Specific

People who know exactly what kind of information they want about someone may have better luck checking out more-

focused portals.

Researchers like real-estate records because they can give you loads of information—from how much a home is worth, to a picture of a neighborhood where someone is from. For instance, when the Enron scandal broke, Richard Smith, a free-lance computer consultant and amateur Internet sleuth, compared the names in the news with Houston property records, and says "you could see the pecking order by the value of their house." Property records for his own house in Brookline, Mass., even included a photo.

Paul Grabowicz, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, recommends the site of NCTR Real Estate Research & Information, a real-estate research firm in Tempe, Ariz., as the best starting point for looking up real-estate records. The site (NCTRonline.com/pub)

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INDOrgs.Virginia.edu/portico/home.html

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Political activity also provides a rich source of information. Mr. Porteous recommends MelissaData.com, a site maintained by Melissa Data Corp., a Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif., firm that checks for accuracy and updates postal mailing lists for companies and universities. "Campaign contributions" is just one of the free searches the site offers. By selecting a year and entering a ZIP code, searchers get a list of everyone in that neighborhood who donated. Because federal law requires an individual who contributes more than \$200 to a federal election to provide their address and the address of their employer, the campaign data offer a good way to figure out someone's profession.

Once you know what someone does, experts recommend checking out specific portals for that occupation. For researching lawyers, Alan Schlein of Washington, who trains businesspeople to efficiently use the Internet, recommends Martindale.com, a site run by LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell of New Providence, N.J., a unit of LexisNexis Group of New York, which is owned by Anglo-Dutch publisher Reed Elsevier. For corporations in general, experts

like the Securities and Exchange Commission site (www.SEC.gov), "a mother lode of information" on top officers and key players in public companies. Mr. Schlein says, adding that earnings statements and annual reports on the site are good places to possibly glean salaries of such people.

If you are willing to shell out a little cash, Mr. Schlein says, there are other places that can be good for salary information for executives and politicians. The online database of Austin, Texas-based Hoover's Inc. (Hoovers.com) provides information on about 12 million companies, including salaries of top executives and board members when available, accessible to individuals for \$49.95 a month. LexisNexis Group's LexisNexis.com has public election records that can provide salary information of elected officials. The service also allows individuals to access newspaper articles and public records for about \$1 to \$9, though spokeswoman Holly Michael says the service can be accessed free at most libraries.

It's also possible to find the birthdays of many people online. AnyBirthday.com, run by American Automated Systems Inc. of Canton, Ohio, is a searchable site that collects date-of-birth information from states that release the statistic. It also has a link to another site owned by American Automated Systems, LocateMe.com, which for \$39 will provide an address, birth date and phone data for your subject. You pay only if the information is available.

Unlikely Spots

Beyond these obvious portals of information on people, there are many unlikely ones.

On Classmates.com, a site for locating former schoolmates run by Los Angeles-based Classmates Online Inc., Mr. Porteous found out where I went to high school and when, information that helped him identify my age. All of the information on the site is data that people seeking to stay in touch with old friends have entered themselves, from where they went to school, their occupation, interests and even pictures. You can search simply by a person's name, but you must register with the site first.

"People don't really think a private investigator is going to use that to find them and to get information on them," Mr. Porteous says, "so they unwittingly put it up, and you find out a lot about people that way."

Another site experts like is Amazon.com, where you can see if someone has written a book or find background information on authors. It's also worthwhile to search people's names in sites associated with them, such as the sites of their employers or colleges.

Newspaper sites also are a gold mine for searchers. Local newspapers from the city where subjects come from can give information about whether they were arrested for something, have run for political office or even are involved in religious institutions.

Shannan Rouss, a 26-year-old editor in New York, knows what you can find when you combine all these resources. She recently checked out a potential boyfriend with the help of search engines, newspaper sites and public records, in hopes of finding his e-mail address.

She didn't find the e-mail address. But she did learn the first five digits of his Social Security number, his recent home addresses, his parents' home address, the year he was born and when he graduated high school.

"If the tables were turned and someone was researching me, I might feel a little vulnerable," she says. She adds

Please Turn to Page R13, Column 2

Dig Up

Continued From Page R6

that while the information didn't affect whether she dated him, since it turned out he had a girlfriend, doing online searches on prospective dates is important and can influence her opinion of them. "It just helps to contextualize the person," Ms. Rouss says, "Did he write for his college newspaper? Has he ever run a 5K?"

People should keep a few cautions in mind before beginning any search. While public records are public, it's a good idea to read the Fair Credit Reporting Act if you are an employer or a landlord, since making decisions about employees and tenants based on what you find may be illegal. Also, because even the most seemingly uncommon names

are common, it's important to make sure the information found in databases refers to the right person.

"You have to be very, very careful," Internet investigator Mr. Parker says. "Who wants to accuse their boyfriend of being a child molester when there are so many people with the same name out there? Unfortunately, people go out there and believe they are Sherlock Holmes and believe everything they read on the Internet."

Beyond that, it's also a good idea to check the accuracy of the sites you are using. The best way, Mr. Porteous says, is to do a search on yourself. "I do that to see how accurate the database is, since a lot have errors," he says.

For example, when a database of birth records said he was born in 1943, he knew the site might have other clerical errors. "It was a year off," Mr. Porteous says. "I was born in 1944." ■

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AL'S MORNING MEETING

Posted, Mar. 12, 2006
Updated, Mar. 12, 2006

Story ideas that you can localize and enterprise. Posted by 7:30 a.m. Mon-Fri.

[More Al's Morning Meeting](#)

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Monday Edition: Sunshine Week Ideas and Coverage

Unsafe dams... Cheerleaders restricted... "Tooththing": a prank becomes a dating practice.

By [Al Tompkins](#) (more by author)

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This week, journalists are telling lots of stories about the importance of open records. As part of Sunshine Week, I want to make sure you know about one of my very favorite Web sites.

[SearchSystems.net](#) is a collection of more than 35,000 public record databases. You can tap into them for free, or pay about five bucks a month for fast access to the data. It is one of just a few Web sites I pay for. With it, you're able to search all sorts of licenses, inspection records, corporation records and a ton more in every state -- plus territories -- and even some other countries. When I show foreign journalists this site, their jaws drop. And, sadly, most American journalists have access to these kinds of open records and still do not use them to enrich stories and dig deeper.

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By Jill Geisler

[Spunk & Bite](#)
By Chip Scanlan

The Norwich (Conn.) Bulletin opened its Sunshine Week coverage with a piece about how wildly cities and counties differ in the way they post public information online. The *Bulletin* said:

Today is the start of national *Sunshine Week*, an effort by media around the country to shed light on the public's right to know. The first effort was launched March 13, 2005.

"This is not just an issue for the press. It's an issue for the public," said Cox Newspapers' Washington Bureau Chief Andy Alexander, chairman of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Freedom of Information Committee. "An alarming amount of public information is being kept secret from citizens, and the problem is increasing by the month. Not only do citizens have a right to know, they have a need to know."

Most records can be found in the town clerk's office in each town, although other individual government departments also store data to which the public has access.

Municipalities are required, under the state's Freedom of Information law, to make town records available, but the law does not require access be available over the Internet.

In Florida, journalists checked to see how open the state's "open records" are. The answer was not encouraging. *The Tallahassee Democrat* said:

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TECHNOLOGY CORNER Searchsystems.net

BY SREENATH SREENIVASAN

The best site for finding public records is SearchSystems.net, with more than 15,200 searchable public-record databases, including records of unclaimed property, sex offenders, and legislative documents, to name a few. You can do nationwide or state-by-state searches, or visit the growing international section.

Most searches are free, and in each case, the site links out to the relevant government agency or private company that tracks the information. The service is U.S.-centric but is adding databases from other countries.

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